

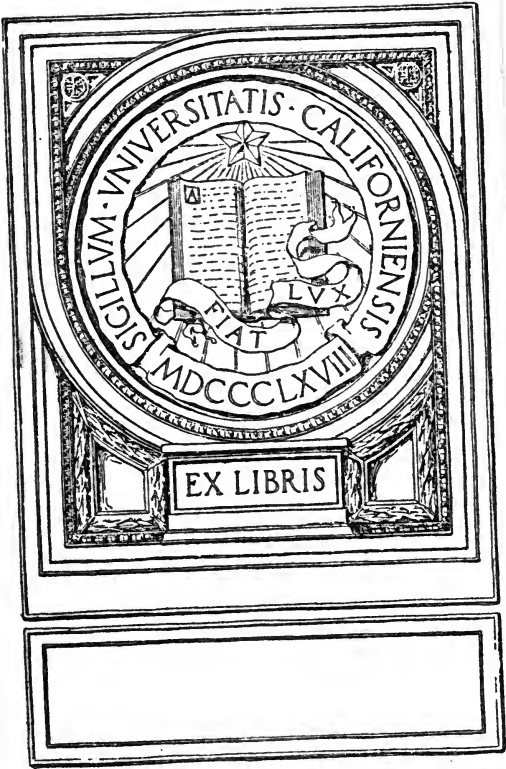
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SPRING IN NEW
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and Other Poems

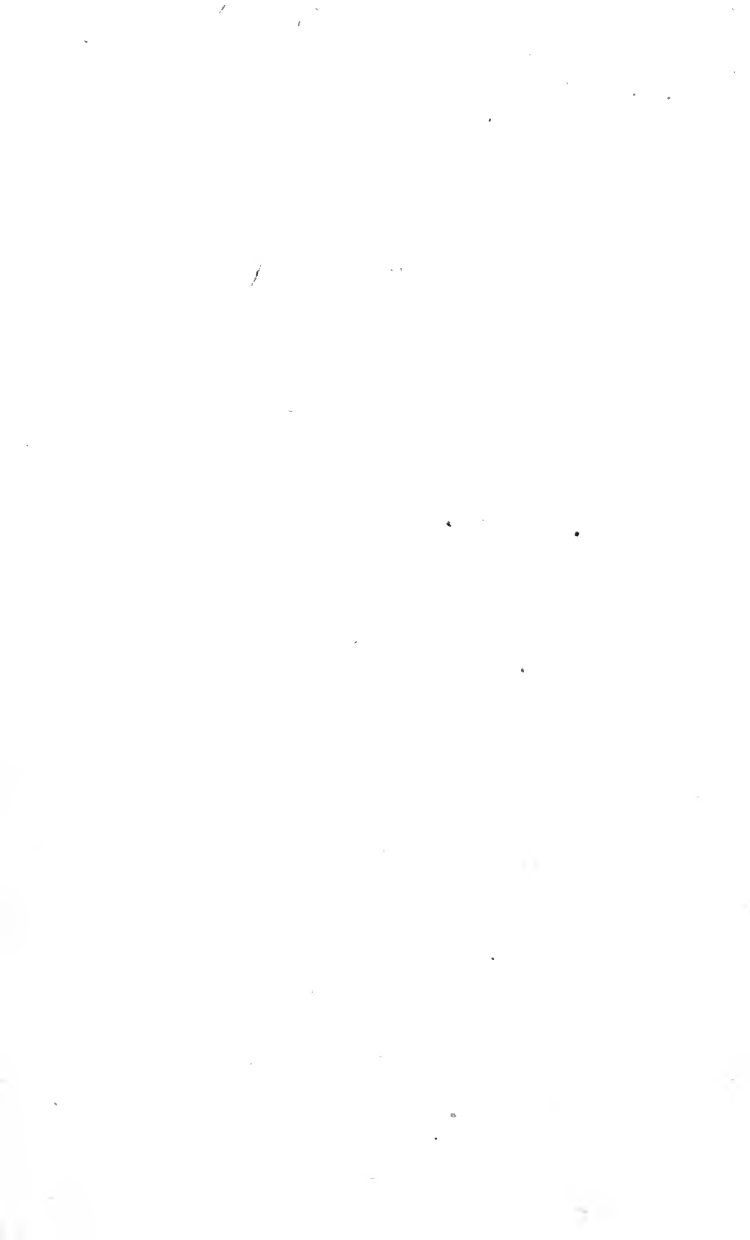
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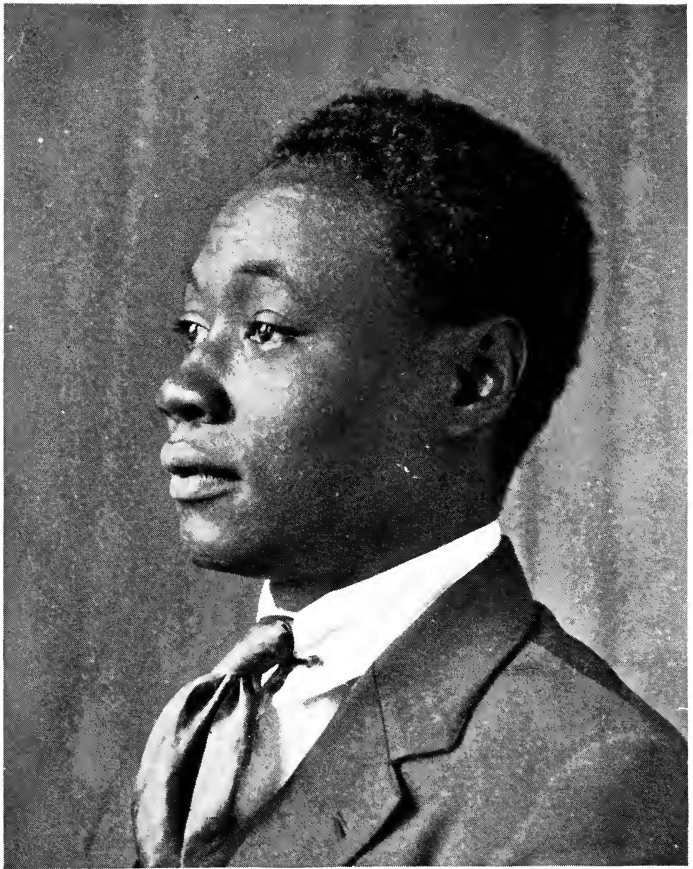
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SPRING IN
NEW HAMPSHIRE
AND OTHER POEMS

THE
CITY OF
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1914



SPRING IN
NEW HAMPSHIRE
AND OTHER POEMS

By
CLAUDE McKAY

LONDON
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1920

TO THE
MEMBERS OF THE
SOCIETY OF
ARTISTS

Preface

The writer of these verses was born in the Clarendon Hills of Jamaica in 1889. In 1911 he published a small volume in the Negro dialect, and later left for the United States where he worked in various occupations and took courses in Agriculture and English at the Kansas State College. In the spring of this year he visited England to arrange for the publication of his poems.

Claude McKay is a pure blooded Negro, and though we have recently been made aware of some of the more remarkable achievements of African Art typified by the sculpture from Benin, and in music by the 'Spirituals,' this is the first instance of success in poetry with which we in Europe at any rate have been brought into contact. The reasons for this late development are not far to seek, and the difficulties presented by modern literary English as an acquired medium would be sufficient to account for the lacuna; but the poems here selected may, in the opinion of not a few who have seen them in periodical form, claim a place beside the best work that the present generation is producing in this country.

I. A. RICHARDS

Cambridge, England.
September, 1920.

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Spring in New Hampshire

(To J. L. J. F. E.)

Too green the springing April grass,
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,
For me to linger here, alas,
While happy winds go laughing by,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors.

Too wonderful the April night,
Too faintly sweet the first May flowers,
The stars too gloriously bright,
For me to spend the evening hours,
When fields are fresh and streams are leaping,
Wearied, exhausted, dully sleeping.

The Spanish Needle

Lovely dainty Spanish needle
With your yellow flower and white,
Dew bedecked and softly sleeping,
Do you think of me to-night?

Shadowed by the spreading mango,
Nodding o'er the rippling stream,
Tell me, dear plant of my childhood,
Do you of the exile dream?

Do you see me by the brook's side
Catching crayfish 'neath the stone,
As you did the day you whispered:
Leave the harmless dears alone?

Do you see me in the meadow
Coming from the woodland spring
With a bamboo on my shoulder
And a pail slung from a string?

Do you see me all expectant
Lying in an orange grove,
While the swee-swees sing above me,
Waiting for my elf-eyed love?

Lovely dainty Spanish needle,
Source to me of sweet delight,
In your far-off sunny southland
Do you dream of me to-night?

The Lynching

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruellest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again:
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun:
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

To O.E.A.

Your voice is the colour of a robin's breast,
And there's a sweet sob in it like rain—still rain in the
night.
Among the leaves of the trumpet-tree, close to his nest,
The pea-dove sings, and each note thrills me with strange
delight
Like the words, wet with music, that well from your
trembling throat.
I'm afraid of your eyes, they're so bold,
Searching me through, reading my thoughts, shining
like gold.
But sometimes they are gentle and soft like the dew on
the lips of the eucharis
Before the sun comes warm with his lover's kiss,
You are sea-foam, pure with the star's loveliness,
Not mortal, a flower, a fairy, too fair for the beauty-shorn
earth,
All wonderful things, all beautiful things, gave of their
wealth to your birth:
O I love you so much, not recking of passion, that I
feel it is wrong,
But men will love you, flower, fairy, non-mortal spirit,
burdened with flesh,
Forever, life-long.

Alfonso, Dressing to Wait at Table, Sings

Alfonso is a handsome bronze-hued lad
Of subtly-changing and surprising parts;
His moods are storms that frighten and make glad,
His eyes were made to capture women's hearts.

Down in the glory-hole Alfonso sings
An olden song of wine and clinking glasses
And riotous rakes; magnificently flings
Gay kisses to imaginary lasses.

Alfonso's voice of mellow music thrills
Our swaying forms and steals our hearts with joy;
And, when he soars, his fine falsetto trills
Are rarest notes of gold without alloy.

But O! Alfonso, wherefore do you sing
Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places?
Soon shall we be beset by clamouring
Of hungry and importunate palefaces.

Flowers of Passion

The dancers have departed, dear,
And the last song has been sung;
The red-stained glasses mock my gaze
And the fiddle lies unstrung.

And I'm alone, alone once more,
Save for your sweet brown face
That comes reproachfully to me
In this unholy place.

I've kissed a thousand flowers, my own,
Gone drunk with their perfume;
But found out, when the madness passed,
You were the one pure bloom.

I've come to realise at last
How awful it may be
To cut adrift from sacred ties
And be completely free.

But life grows many flowers, my love,
Within its garden wall,
And passion's are the strangest
And the deadliest of all.

To Work

The Dawn! the Dawn, the crimson-tinted comes
Out of the low still skies, over the hills,
New York's fantastic spires and cheerless domes,—
The Dawn! my spirit to its spirit thrills.
Almost the mighty city is asleep,
No pushing crowd, no tramping, tramping feet;
But here and there a few cars, groaning, creep
Along, above and underneath the street,
Bearing their strangely-ghostly burdens by,—
The women and the men of garish nights,
Their eyes wine-weakened and their clothes awry,
Nodding under the strong electric lights.
On through the waning shadows of New York,
Before the Dawn, I wend my way to work.

Morning Joy

At night the wide and level stretch of wold,
Which at high noon had basked in quiet gold,
Far as the eye could see was ghostly white;
Dark was the night save for the snow's weird light.

I drew the shades far down, crept into bed;
Hearing the cold wind moaning overhead
Through the sad pines, my soul, catching its pain,
Went sorrowing with it across the plain.

At dawn behold! the pall of night was gone
Save where a few shrubs melancholy, lone,
Detained part of its shadow. Golden-lipped
The laughing grasses heaven's sweet wine sipped.

The sun rose smiling o'er the river's breast,
And my soul, by his happy spirit blest,
Soared like a bird to greet him in the sky
And drew out of his heart Eternity.

Reminiscences

When the day is at its dimmest
And the air is wild with snow,
And the city's at its grimdest
In mine eyes there is a glow. . . .
When the day is at its brightest
And the city is a dream,
And my heart is at its lightest,
In mine eyes there is a gleam;
For I'm thinking, O I'm thinking,
Of an old worn sugar-mill
Where the southern sun is sinking—
Gold and crimson—o'er the hill;
And I hear the toilers talking
As they shoulder pick and hoe,
And I watch their steady walking
To the quiet plain below.
O! I see the white stream dashing
Gay and reckless through the brake,
O'er the root-entwined rocks washing
Swiftly, madly to the lake;
O! I hear the waters falling,
Flowing, falling, flowing free,
And the sound of voices calling
O'er the billows of the sea.

On Broadway

About me young and careless feet
Linger along the garish street;
Above, a hundred shouting signs
Shed down their bright fantastic glow
Upon the merry crowd and lines
Of moving carriages below:
O wonderful is Broadway—only
My heart, my heart is lonely.

Desire naked, linked with Passion,
Goes strutting by in brazen fashion;
From playhouse, cabaret and inn
The rainbow lights of Broadway blaze
All gay without, all glad within;
As in a dream I stand and gaze
At Broadway, shining Broadway—only
My heart, my heart is lonely.

Love Song

Heart of the saffron rose,
Lines of the lily red,
Gold of the buttercup,
Dew of the daisies' bed,
Flight of the rising bird
Luring me to the skies,
Smile of an evening star
Playing before mine eyes,

Rime of the silver morn
Fair on the green of trees,
Scent of the coffee blooms
Waking the drowsy bees;
Charming and beautiful,
Rare are these sights to see;
But more than all and more
Is your fond heart to me.

North and South

O sweet are tropic lands for waking dreams !
There time and life move lazily along ;
There by the banks of blue-and-silver streams
Grass-sheltered crickets chirp incessant song,
Gay-coloured lizards loll all through the day,
Their tongues outstretched for careless little flies,
And swarthy children in the fields at play
Look upward laughing at the smiling skies.
A breath of idleness is in the air
That casts a subtle spell upon all things,
And love and mating-time are everywhere
And wonder to life's commonplaces clings.
The fluttering humming-bird darts through the trees
And dips his long beak in the big bell-flowers,
The leisured buzzard floats upon the breeze
Riding a crescent cloud for endless hours ;
The sea beats softly on the emerald strands,—
O sweet for dainty dreams are tropic lands !

Rest in Peace

No more for you the city's thorny ways,
The ugly corners of the Negro belt;
The miseries and pains of these harsh days
By you will never, never again be felt.

No more, if still you wander, will you meet
With nights of unabating bitterness,
They cannot reach you in your safe retreat,
The city's hate, the city's prejudice!

'Twas sudden—but your menial task is done,
The dawn now breaks on you, the dark is over,
The sea is crossed, the longed-for port is won,
Farewell, oh fare you well! fond friend and lover.

A Memory of June

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May,
With scarlet roses tinting her green breast,
And mating thrushes ushering in her day,
And Earth on tiptoe for her golden guest,

I always see the evening when we met—
The first of June baptised in tender rain—
And walked home through the wide streets, gleaming
wet,
Arms locked, our warm flesh pulsing with love's pain.

I always see the cheerful little room,
And in the corner, fresh and white, the bed
Sweet scented with a delicate perfume,
Wherein for one night only we were wed :

Where in the starlit stillness we lay mute
And heard the whispering showers all night long,
And your brown burning body was a lute
Whereon wild passion played his fevered song.

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May,
With scarlet roses staining her fair feet,
My soul takes leave of me to sing all day
A night of rare love, perfect and complete.

To Winter

Stay, season of calm love and soulful snows!
There is a subtle sweetness in the sun,
The ripples on the stream's breast gaily run,
The wind more boisterously by me blows,
And each succeeding day now longer grows.
The birds a gladder music have begun,
The squirrel, full of mischief and of fun,
From maples' topmost branch small brown twigs
throws.

I read these pregnant signs, know what they mean:
I know that thou art making ready to go.
Oh stay! . . . I fled a land where fields are green
Always, and palms wave gently to and fro,
And winds are balmy, blue brooks ever sheen,
To ease my heart of its impassioned woe.

Winter in the Country

Sweet life! how lovely to be here
And feel the soft sea-laden breeze
Strike my flushed face, the spruce's fair
Free limbs to see, the lesser trees'

Bare hands to touch, the sparrow's cheep
To heed, and watch his nimble flight
Above the short brown grass asleep.
Love glorious in his friendly might,

Music that every heart could bless,
And thoughts of life serene, divine,
Beyond my power to express
Crowd round this lifted heart of mine!

But oh! to leave this paradise
~~For the city's~~ dirty basement room,
Where, beauty hidden from the eyes,
A table, bed, bureau and broom

In corner set, two crippled chairs
All covered up with dust and grim
With hideousness and scars of years,
And gaslight burning weird and dim,

Will welcome me . . . And yet, and yet
The sea-wind here, the winter birds,
The glory of the soft sunset,
There come to me in words.

After the Winter

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
And against the morning's white
The shivering birds beneath the eaves
Have sheltered for the night,
We'll turn our faces southward, love,
Toward the summer isle
Where bamboos spire to shafted grove
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill
Where towers the cotton tree,
And leaps the laughing crystal rill
And works the droning bee,
And we will build a cottage there
Beside an open glade,
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near
And ferns that never fade.

The Tropics in New York

Bananas ripe and green and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

Mine eyes grew dim and I could no more gaze,
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

I Shall Return

I shall return again; I shall return
To laugh and love and watch with wonder-eyes,
At golden noon the forest fires burn,
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.
I shall return to loiter by the streams
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,
And realise once more my thousand dreams
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes
That stir the hidden depths of native life,
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes:
I shall return, I shall return again
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.

The Castaways

The vivid grass with visible delight
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth;
And butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
Chirping and dancing for the season's birth,
And dandelions and rare daffodils
That hold the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold
And thrushes sending forth their joyous trills;
Not these, not these did I at first behold:
But seated on the benches daubed with green,
The castaways of earth, some fast asleep,
With many a withered woman wedged between,
And over all life's shadows dark and deep:
Moaning I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not to see.

December 1919

Last night I heard your voice, mother,
The words you sang to me
When I, a little barefoot boy,
Knelt down against your knee.

And tears gushed from my heart, mother,
And passed beyond its wall,
But though the fountain reached my throat
The drops refused to fall.

'Tis ten years since you died, mother,
Just ten dark years of pain,
And oh, I only wish that I
Could weep for once again.

Flame-Heart

So much have I forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years; I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not;
Forgotten is the special, startling season
Of some beloved tree's flowering and fruiting,
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting:
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

I still recall the honey-fever grass,
But I cannot bring back to mind just when
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
I often try to think in what sweet month
The languid painted ladies used to dapple
The yellow bye road mazing from the main,
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple:
I have forgotten, strange, but quite remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

What weeks, what months, what time o' the mild year
We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days,
Even the sacred moments, when we played,
All innocent of passion uncorrupt,
At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade:
We were so happy, happy,—I remember
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.

In Bondage

I would be wandering in distant fields
Where man, and bird, and beast, lives leisurely,
And the old earth is kind and ever yields
Her goodly gifts to all her children free;
Where life is fairer, lighter, less demanding,
And boys and girls have time and space for play
Before they come to years of understanding,—
Somewhere I would be singing, far away;
For life is greater than the thousand wars
Men wage for it in their insatiate lust,
And will remain like the eternal stars
When all that is to-day is ashes and dust:
But I am bound with you in your mean graves,
Oh black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves.

Harlem Shadows

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
Eager to heed desire's insistent call :
Ah, little dark girls, who in slippered feet
Go prowling throught the night from street to street.

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest,
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonour and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay.
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

The Harlem Dancer

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway ;
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form ;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black, shiny curls
Profusely fell ; and, tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her with eager, passionate gaze :
But, looking at her falsely-smiling face,
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

A Prayer

(For Max Eastman)

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling,
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from
falling.

Mine eyes are open but they cannot see for gloom of night;
I can no more than lift my heart to thee for inward light.

The wild and fiery passion of my youth consumes my soul;
In agony I turn to thee for truth and self-control.

For Passion and all the pleasures it can give will die the
death;
But this of me eternally must live, thy borrowed breath.

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling,
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from
falling.

The Barrier

✓ — identified / Robinson

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illuminated way;

I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river reed,
Comes from your trembling throat;

I must not see upon your face
Love's softly glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark.

When Dawn Comes to the City

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The moaning, groaning cars,
And the old milk carts go rumbling by
Under the same dull stars.
Out of the tenements, cold as stone,
Dark figures start for work ;
I watch them sadly shuffle on,
'Tis dawn, dawn in New York.

But I would be on the island of the sea,
In the heart of the island of the sea,
Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing,
And the hens are cackling in the rose-apple tree,
Where the old draft-horse is neighing, neighing, neighing
Out on the brown dew-silvered lawn,
And the tethered cow is lowing, lowing, lowing,
And dear old Ned is braying, braying, braying,
And the shaggy Nannie goat is calling, calling, calling
From her little trampled corner of the long wide lea
That stretches to the waters of the hill-stream falling
Sheer upon the flat rocks joyously !
There, oh there ! on the island of the sea
There I would be at dawn.

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The crazy, lazy cars,
And the same milk-carts go rumbling by
Under the dying stars.
A lonely newsboy hurries by,
Humming a recent ditty ;
Red streaks strike through the gray of the
sky,
The dawn comes to the city.

But I would be on the island of the sea,
In the heart of the island of the sea,
Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing,
And the hens are cackling in the rose-apple tree,
Where the old draft-horse is neighing, neighing, neighing
Out on the brown dew-silvered lawn,
And the tethered cow is lowing, lowing, lowing,
And dear old Ned is braying, braying, braying,
And the shaggy Nannie goat is calling, calling, calling
From her little trampled corner of the long wide lea
That stretches to the waters of the hill-stream falling
Sheer upon the flat rocks joyously!
There, oh there! on the island of the sea
There I would be at dawn.

The Choice

O you would clothe me in silken frocks
And house me from the cold,
And bind with bright bands my glossy locks
And buy me chains of gold;

And give me—meekly to do my will—
The hapless sons of men:—
But the wild goat bounding on the barren hill
Droops in the grassy pen.

Sukee River

Thou sweet-voiced stream that first gavest me drink,
Watched o'er me when I floated on thy breast,
What black-faced boy now gambols on thy brink,
Or finds beneath thy rocks a place of rest?
What naked lad doth linger long by thee,
And run and tumble in the sun-scorched sand,
Or heed the pea-dove in the wild fig tree,
While I am roaming in an alien land?
No wonder that my heart is happy never,
I have been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

When from my early wandering I returned,
Did I not promise to remain for aye?
Yet instantly for other regions yearned
And wearied of thee in a single day.
Thy murmurs sound now in my anguished ears,
Creating in my heart a world of pain;
I see thee wistful flowing down the years
And though I pine, afar I must remain:
No wonder that my feet are faltering ever,
I have been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

Though other boys may frolic by thy side,
I know their merry moods thou dost not heed
When I, O mother of my soul and bride,
Lie on strange breasts and on strange kisses feed.
Sometimes, kind fate permitting me, I dream
I am floating on thy bosom of deep blue,
A child again, beloved, unchanging stream;
But soon I wake to find it all untrue:
I vowed that never, never would we sever,
But I've been faithless to thee, Sukee River.

Exhortation

Through the pregnant universe rumbles life's terrific
thunder

And Earth's bowels quake with terror; strange and
terrible storms break,

Lightning-torches flame the heavens, kindling souls of
men thereunder:

Africa! long ages sleeping, Oh my motherland, awake!

In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn
that is breaking,

And its golden glory fills the western skies:—

Oh my brothers and my sisters, wake! arise!

For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead
are waking,

Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's dis-
guise,

And the foolish, even children, are made wise;

For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new
world in making—

Oh my brothers, dreaming for dim centuries,

Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn you eyes!

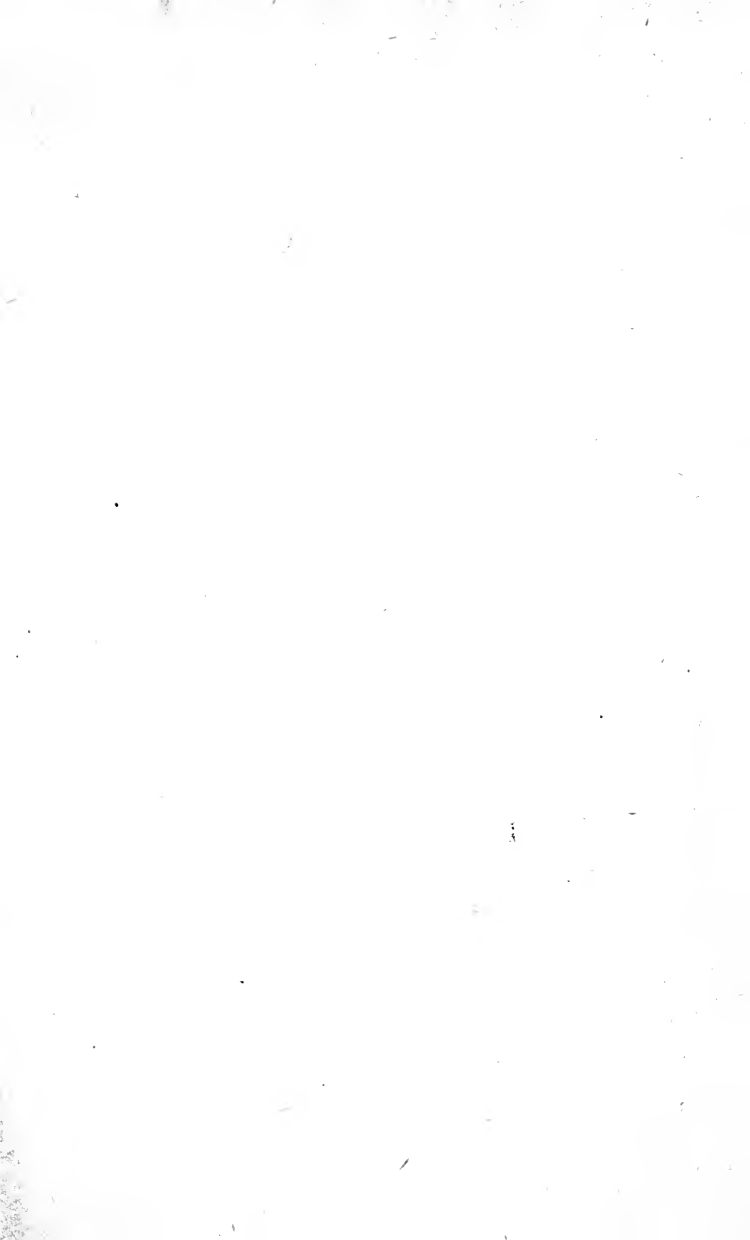
Oh the night is sweet for sleeping, but the shining day's
for working;

Sons of the seductive night, for your children's child-
ren's sake,

From the deep primeval forests where the crouching
leopard's lurking,

Lift your heavy-lidded eyes,—Ethiopia! awake!

In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn
that is breaking,
And its golden glory fills the western skies:—
Oh my brothers and my sisters, wake! arise!
For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead
are waking,
Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's dis-
guise,
And the foolish, even children, are made wise;
For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new
world in making—
Oh my brothers, dreaming for long centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn your eyes!



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